

Reanimating History through Body, Sign, and Texture: Integrating Phenomenology, Semiotics, and Dramaturgy in Public Interest in the Play *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira*

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ABSTRACT

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*Amidst growing public interest in historical narratives in performing arts, a trend reinforced by the need to recontextualize collective memory in the digital age, a key question arises: how can theater performances bring history back to life and make it relevant to today's audiences? This article answers that question through an analysis of the play *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* by director Wawan Sofwan, utilizing three main theoretical frameworks: Sobchack's visual media phenomenology, which emphasizes the embodied experience of the audience; Pavis's theater semiotics, which describes the network of stage signs; and Lehmann's post-dramatic dramaturgy, which highlights affective texture and non-narrative aesthetics. This research uses a qualitative approach with performance analysis, documentation studies, and structured surveys of the audience. The results show that the performance successfully reactivated historical experiences through the interaction between archival visuals, the actors' performativity, and the affective dramaturgical atmosphere. The main findings reveal that history is not only communicated as information but also presented as an embodied experience that triggers empathy, clarifies the socio-political context, and deepens the younger generation's understanding of national movement figures. This article offers new insights into the aesthetic strategies of contemporary historical theater, particularly how the integration of body, sign, and texture can be an effective model for revitalizing collective memory in the performance space. These findings are important for the development of historical dramaturgy, cultural education, and theater production that is responsive to the need for national memory reconstruction in the digital age.*

INTRODUCTION

Amidst the increasingly dynamic discourse of contemporary Indonesian theater, there is a strong interest in performances that explore historical narratives not merely as a backdrop, but as a space for reconstructing collective memory and cultural identity. *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* by Wawan Sofwan, which was staged on November 25, 2021, at the Jakarta Arts Building, is significant: by presenting figures from the Indonesian national movement who were exiled to Banda Naira, this play not only presents historical drama, but also reconstructs the atmosphere and affective experiences of the past. The play was then broadcast online via the *IndonesiaKaya* YouTube channel, reaching a wider audience as part of a creative response to the pandemic situation, giving viewers the opportunity to immerse themselves in the meaning of struggle.

Public interest, as revealed by surveys, shows that this performance successfully bridges the gap between historical facts and contemporary awareness. This phenomenon encourages an analytical need to understand the aesthetic and semiotic mechanisms behind the appeal of historical performances such as this (Saing, Parmin, & Fitra, 2025). The fundamental question that arises is: how do the semiotic elements of the stage, dramatic structure, and dramaturgy of the performance work together to create a historical narrative that resonates and is meaningful to today's audience?

In the discipline of global theater studies, since the European avant-garde era, a tradition of semiotic analysis of theater has emerged: the view that the stage, movement, costumes, lighting, sound, and all aspects of performance are a system of signs that can be read and interpreted. Veltrusky (1995) shows that theater semiotics developed as a way of understanding theater as a “system of signs,” not just the dramatic script, but the entire stage dramaturgy. In line with this, contemporary research such as that by Pacurar (2021) shows how performances can be analyzed as complete semiotic systems, in which theatrical significance is constructed through a combination of visual, auditory, and spatial elements.

In Indonesia, a semiotic approach to theater has also begun to be developed: for example, Sahid (2013) examines how elements such as gestures, makeup, costumes, decor, lighting, sound, and setting are understood as theatrical codes that communicate with the audience. These findings show that “communication” in theater performances is not merely verbal, but rather multi-coded, an important foundation for semiotics-based performance analysis.

In addition, the configuration of dramaturgical structure has also undergone a transformation in contemporary theater. Hans Thies Lehmann's concept of Postdramatic Theater marks a shift from the dominance of dramatic text to a performative aesthetic in which text becomes one of many elements, alongside space, body, media, sound, and visual imagery (Lehmann, 2006). This post-dramatic form of theater opens up space for historical performances that are not bound by linear narratives or classical dramatic structures, allowing for the use of multimedia, visual montages, sound, non-conventional stage spaces, and intense affective interactions between the audience and the action on stage.

In the Indonesian context, post-dramatic theater practices have been identified since the late 20th century. Recent research shows how local theater communities have adopted this aesthetic and produced performances with non-textual or hybrid dramaturgy, simultaneously combining text, space, body, and media (Afrizal, Sahrul, & Yusril, 2023). However, the systematic combination of stage semiotics, structure-texture analysis, and postdramatic dramaturgy in the context of local historical performances is still very limited, leaving theoretical and empirical gaps to be filled.

Thus, this study offers novelty: namely, comprehensively mapping how the three theoretical frameworks of stage semiotics, drama structure-texture, and postdramatic dramaturgy interact in historical performances such as “*Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira*,” and how these interactions shape public appeal and historical-affective experiences. This approach not only enriches local theater studies, but also contributes to the global discourse on historiographical theater and the performativity of collective memory.

The urgency of this issue becomes even more apparent when we consider the state of history education in Indonesia, where historical narratives are generally conveyed through formal media such as schools and textbooks. Historical theater performances offer an important alternative: a dramatic medium that not only conveys facts, but also evokes empathy, identification, and affective understanding of historical events, which are important aspects for the formation of national identity and collective consciousness.

Based on semiotic theory, dramatic structure and texture, and postdramatic dramaturgy theory, this study aims to explain the aesthetic and communicative mechanisms behind the appeal of historical narratives in theater, as well as to reveal how performances such as "*Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira*" can function as a space for collective memory and a cultural educational agent.

The study of *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* requires a theoretical framework capable of explaining the relationship between the audience's experience, the sign system in the performance, and contemporary dramaturgy that combines elements of media, visuality, and performativity. Therefore, this study uses three main frameworks: Vivian Sobchack's visual media phenomenology, Patrice Pavis' theater semiotics, and Hans-Thies Lehmann's postdramatic dramaturgy.

Vivian Sobchack's theory, in her monumental work *The Address of the Eye* (1992), develops a phenomenology of visual media that emphasizes that the viewing experience is not passive, but rather a form of embodied relationship between the viewer's body and the world of visual representation. According to Sobchack (1992), every visual experience is "a reversible sensory relation between viewer and viewed," a reciprocal relationship in which the screen (or stage) is not only an object to be gazed at, but also an entity that "gazes back," forming an intersubjective experience.

Sobchack's phenomenology is relevant to the analysis of historical performances because they use multimedia elements, archival projections, and reconstructive visuals. Sobchack (2004) shows that visual media activates the "cinesthetic subject," that is, a subject who experiences media through the simultaneous involvement of the senses, body, emotions, and memory. Thus, when the audience witnesses the visualization of Hatta or Sjahrir in exile, the experience is not merely observation, but also an embodied process that triggers emotional and historical resonance. Sobchack's concept is used to interpret how the visual experience in the performance through archival projections, symbolic lighting, and the atmosphere of the space shapes the audience's affective closeness to historical events.

Patrice Pavis is one of the central figures in theater semiotics through important works such as *Languages of the Stage* (1982). Pavis (1996) asserts that theatrical performances are multi-layered sign systems, in which every element of the stage and the actors' bodies, space, props, costumes, lighting, sound, rhythm, and technology function as simultaneous systems of signification.

The three of Pavis' ideas most relevant to this study are, first, the performance text Pavis (1992) no longer views the script as central, but emphasizes that the performance is a "performance text" composed of various visual, gestural, acoustic, and spatial codes; second, the intercultural and intertextual dynamics of historical performances always involve intertextuality between historical documents, national memory, and contemporary interpretations.

Pavis' intertextual analysis understands how historical texts are transferred to the actors' bodies and the stage space; third, the hourglass model explains the process of theatrical interpretation from the creator's intention to the stage code to the audience's perception. This model is highly relevant to this study, as the focus of the research is on how audiences interpret the visualization of history in performances. Thus, this study

analyzes how semiotic elements such as documentary projections, colonial-era costumes, 20th-century Banda Naira stage design, and actors' gestures represent the experiences of exile and the struggles of national figures.

Meanwhile, Lehmann's theory in *Postdramatic Theatre* (2006) has greatly influenced our understanding of theater forms that do not rely on Aristotelian dramatic structures. Lehmann (2006) states that contemporary theater emphasizes performativity, visuality, media hybridity, simultaneity, and narrative fragmentation. Media hybridity combines multimedia, historical archives, sound, and lighting as integral parts of dramaturgy. This is evident in the performance of *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira*, which features documentary visual projections. Affective dramaturgy emphasizes not a linear plot, but the creation of atmosphere and emotional experience. This is consistent with the finding that the audience experiences an affective depth of longing, alienation, and empathy for historical figures. The crisis of representation is that postdramatic theater does not always seek to "represent" history realistically, but offers an intermedial experience that allows the audience to reconstruct history affectively and personally. Lehmann's theory is used to interpret how the performance presents history not as a narrative, but as a performative experience that is sensory and intermedial in nature.

This study combines the three theories, from Sobchack to understand how the visual experience of performance shapes the embodied relationship between the audience and history. Next, Pavis to analyze the semiotic mechanisms of performance that make history communicative and interpretable. Meanwhile, Lehmann to understand the contemporary dramaturgy used by Wawan Sofwan in constructing an immersive and affective historical experience. This integration also supports multilevel analysis, for example: the level of visual representation, the level of sign systems and performance structures, and the level of audience experience. These theories enable the research to cover cognitive, aesthetic, semiotic, and affective aspects simultaneously, an approach that has not been widely used in Indonesian historical theater studies.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with performance analysis methods combined with phenomenology of audience experience and semiotic-dramaturgical analysis as the main framework. This approach was chosen because the object of study is a historical theater performance that not only presents a dramatic text but also offers visual, affective, and performative experiences that must be understood through the overall relationship between the audience and the stage. This method is in line with the view that theater as an artistic event is a multisemiotic and multimodal entity that can only be unraveled through procedural descriptions and in-depth interpretive analysis.

The data sources in this study consist of four categories: the live performance of *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* as the main data; video recordings of the performance after it was streamed; visual documentation and production materials; audience responses obtained through forms/questionnaires; and interviews with the creators and several audience members to deepen the dimensions of the performance experience.

The research population included all audience members who attended the performance. From this population, a sample was taken using purposive sampling, which is the selection of samples based on characteristics relevant to the research objectives. The research sample consisted of 70 respondents who filled out a viewing experience form. They were selected because they represented a diversity of ages, educational backgrounds, and levels of exposure to theater, thus providing a comprehensive picture of audience reception patterns.

The research instruments included: a performance observation sheet, used to record visual elements, dramaturgy, stage design, actor gestures, use of multimedia, and the dynamics of space and time during the performance. A questionnaire on the audience's experience, containing open and closed questions about perceptions, historical interpretations, emotional reactions, and levels of visual engagement. Semi-structured interview guides to explore affective and interpretive aspects. Production documents, including stage photos, artistic design, and other creative archives.

Data collection was conducted in three stages. First, direct observation of the performance was conducted twice to ensure the accuracy of recording the semiotic and aesthetic elements of the performance. Second, forms were collected immediately after the performance to capture the audience's experience while it was still fresh and minimized retrospective bias. Third, additional interviews were conducted using the snowball method with audience members who provided interesting answers on the questionnaire, in order to deepen the phenomenological dimensions of visual and affective experiences.

The research procedure began with ethnographic recording of the stage through detailed descriptions of visual and performative elements. These descriptions were then converted into data units in the form of fragments of performance events, such as scenes of *exile*, projections of *Dutch archives*, *communal eating rituals*, or *readings of Sjahrir's letters*. Data analysis uses three layers of approach: Sobchack's phenomenological analysis, which interprets the embodied experience of the audience as a reciprocal relationship between the audience's body and the visual world of the stage; Pavis' semiotic analysis, which examines how stage signs function as a historical communication system through visual, gestural, and spatial codes; Lehmann's dramaturgical analysis, which is used to assess postdramatic forms, media hybridity, and the affectivity of performances. The three approaches are combined through qualitative triangulation to ensure the validity of the interpretation. Triangulation is carried out by comparing (a) stage observation notes, (b) audience questionnaire data codes, and (c) interviews. Only findings that appear consistently in all three sources are used as the basis for analytical generalization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the research is that the audience's interest in *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* is not solely triggered by the historical theme it raises, but by the aesthetic configuration of the performance that builds a visual, semiotic, and dramaturgical experience that reinforces each other. Three layers of analysis, embodied experience (Sobchack), stage sign systems (Pavis), and postdramatic dramaturgy (Lehmann), show that the historical narrative works effectively because the structure of the performance

allows the audience to experience history, not just understand or witness it. The following findings show how this experience is formed.

Visual Experience as Affective Space: Sobchack's Phenomenology

A phenomenological analysis of audience responses indicates that the visual elements of the performance serve as a meeting point between history and the audience's bodies. The visuals are not merely a medium for conveying historical information, but an "affective space" that recreates the experience of exile of the movement's figures.

This phenomenon is evident in the most dominant emotional affections, which intersect strongly with the category of immersive visuals. The audience reported experiences that were "touching," "thrilling," or "goosebump-inducing," especially in scenes featuring projections of exile archives, the atmosphere of the characters' rooms, and images of the tranquil Banda Sea. These findings are in line with Sobchack's idea of the cinesthetic subject, namely a subject who experiences media through bodily resonance, not just cognitive perception.

Thus, the visual experience in this play is reversible: the audience does not only see history, but is "embraced" by history. The visuals presented by cold light, narrow spaces, and fragile archival textures create an atmosphere that places the audience in a position of empathy through what Sobchack calls the intersubjective relationship between the viewer and the viewed.

It is important to note that this response does not stand alone; it is formed because the visuality of the performance is designed to target bodily experience. Slowly moving light strips, elongated shadows, and layered archival projections create a sense of closeness that is not informative, but visceral. The results of the study show that it is this embodied closeness that strengthens the relevance of history to contemporary consciousness, especially among younger generations who generally experience an emotional distance from formal history.

Stage Sign System and Historical Meaning Reconstruction: Pavis' Semiotics

The second finding reveals that this performance works through a network of mutually supportive signs so that the audience can interpret historical experiences in a more complex manner. Using Pavis' model, analysis of stage semiotics shows that historical significance does not rely on a single element (e.g., dialogue), but on the simultaneous interaction between colonial-era costumes, minimalist stage design, characters' personal props (letters, books, maps), gestures of exhaustion, and the rhythm of interactions between characters.

In Pavis' *sablier* (hourglass) model, there are three stages: the creator's intention, stage codes, and audience interpretation. The results of the study show that this process occurs smoothly. The director's intention to focus on the characters' experiences of exile and inner struggle is translated through various visual codes which are then captured by the audience as historical meaning that is not patronizing, but rather intimate.

For example, the use of a narrow and static stage space, which at the sign level can be read as a representation of alienation and limited movement. Many audience members interpreted this space as a symbol of an "open prison," a metaphor that is not present in

the dialogue but is conveyed through a system of gestural and spatial signs. Thus, historical meaning is not communicated through explicit statements but through a structure of signs that conveys historical messages implicitly and multisensory.

The results of this study reinforce the position that theater semiotics plays an important role in activating collective memory. Audiences who were initially unfamiliar with historical figures were ultimately able to understand the emotional and ideological context of their struggles because the performance operated signs that were accessible through aesthetic experience, not just cognitive knowledge.

Postdramatic as a Medium for Historical Experience: Lehmann's Dramaturgy

The third finding is that the dramaturgical structure of this performance does not follow the Aristotelian dramatic pattern, but rather the postdramatic pattern as described by Lehmann. The fragmentation of scenes, visual montage, minimal expository dialogue, and the dominance of emotional atmosphere over linear plot show that this performance functions as a space for experience, not just a narrative space.

Analysis of the dramaturgy shows that this performance prioritizes affective dramaturgy, which aims to evoke affection through atmosphere rather than conveying a plot-driven story. Silent scenes, repetitive movements, and slowly fading lighting are the main elements that shape the experience of history as a feeling rather than mere information.

In the context of historical theater, this dramaturgical strategy is a significant finding because it allows history to function as a lived experience. In other words, history is not presented as a story that is told, but as an existential condition that is experienced together by the audience and the actors. This clarifies the relevance of Lehmann's theory, in which the power of postdramatic theater lies in its ability to evoke affective events that are not always based on words.

This shows that it is this form of dramaturgy that bridges the gap between the audience and history. The audience does not need to understand the academic details of history; they simply need to experience the emotional atmosphere created by the performance to connect with the meaning of the characters' struggles.

Integrating Visuality into Historical Interpretation

The integration of these three theories shows that the public's attraction to the historical narrative in this play stems from the simultaneous interaction of three layers: affective visuals (Sobchack) that produce a visual experience that evokes emotional closeness that transcends historical boundaries; signs to meaning (Pavis), where the stage sign system translates history into a multisemiotic experience; and finally, dramaturgy as atmosphere (Lehmann), where postdramatic theater provides space for the audience to experience history in an embodied way. Finally, dramaturgy becomes atmosphere (Lehmann) as postdramatic theater provides space for the audience to experience history in an embodied way.

These results show that a successful historical performance not only represents the past but also produces a historical experience that allows the audience to enter the "sensory space of the past." This is the core of public interest: the audience not only knows history but also feels present in history. The findings of this study fill a void in Indonesian theater

studies, which have tended to focus more on script analysis or ideology rather than the audience's visual and dramaturgical experience. This study shows that historical performances can be a medium for affective education, not just informative education. Visual and postdramatic aesthetics are capable of reviving history in ways that texts or formal teaching cannot achieve. Stage semiotics acts as a bridge between archives, collective memory, and contemporary experience. This research not only maps public appeal but also offers a new analytical model for the study of Indonesian historical theater.

CONCLUSION

This research confirms that the application of three theoretical frameworks, Sobchack's visual media phenomenology, Pavis's theater semiotics, and Lehmann's post-dramatic dramaturgy is capable of explaining how *Mereka yang Menunggu di Banda Naira* builds public interest in historical narratives through embodied viewing experiences, structured sign systems, and dramaturgical textures that emphasize affectivity and historicity. The three theories complement each other in interpreting the performance as a space of historical experience mediated by the audience's bodies, as a network of representations that produces historical meaning in visual and performative forms, and as an artistic practice that shifts the focus from narrative flow to atmosphere and affective intensity. Thus, this study achieves its objective, which is to show that the public's interest in historical plays is not only based on their historical material but also on how history is experienced, arranged, and felt through the language of contemporary theater.

As a follow-up, this study recommends the development of similar studies on performances that highlight local history in various regions to see how contemporary visual aesthetics and dramaturgy can strengthen the inheritance of collective memory. Further research also needs to expand the methods, for example, with more in-depth audience ethnography or comparative analysis of works that use different media such as film, performance installations, or digital museums. For theater practitioners, this research suggests further exploration of the use of visual archives and affective strategies that can open up historical experiences for audiences across generations, especially in the context of cultural education. Thus, this study not only provides theoretical contributions but also offers practical directions for historical theater production in Indonesia in the future.

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